

1. How to become a monk?

There are these five requirements (*sampatti*) to become a monk.

၁။ ဝှက္ခာဏ်၏ ပြည့်စုံခြင်း (i.e. the monk-to-be, a novice, 20 or more years of age, no history of a *pārājika* offence, physically and sexually regular man of human species, with permission to ordain from his parents (if the parents are still alive))

၂။ ဥတ်၏ ပြည့်စုံခြင်း (complete motion, i.e. invitation and information of the ordination to the group of monks who came to be responsible for the ordination, they should be at least 10 in North & Central India and at least 5 if the ordination is carried out abroad)

၃။ ကမ္မတိဘ၏ ပြည့်စုံခြင်း (complete announcement, which contains the details about the ordination, is recited by at least three "experienced" monks for three times, and its contents are "correctly pronounced")

၄။ သိမ်၏ ပြည့်စုံခြင်း (ordination hall (sima hall) either agreed upon by the Community of Monks according to the scriptural instructions, or temporarily marked as an exception, e.g. as the udakasima (on a raft on a river or pond) or gamasima (taking the village as the limit).

၅။ ပရိသတ်၏ပြည့်စုံခြင်း ဆိုတဲ့ အဂါင်းပါးနှင့် ပြည့်စုံရပါတယ်။ သမ္မတိဘီးပါး လိုပေါ်ပါတယ်။ (the community, i.e. monks, should be complete in number - 5 outside central/north India, and 10 in central/north India, free from terminal offence (parajika), with one as the preceptor who has at least 10 years of monkhood and is knowledgeable and experienced. The ordination is done in "secrecy" to avoid scaring or contempt of those who would attend the ceremony without understanding or with bad intentions. Thus lay people and novices are not allowed to be too close to the event of ordination.)

These five *sampatti* are called "five factors" (*pañcanga*), which is pronounced in Burmese as "*pyinsinga*" (ပျဉ်ဗုံး). Any monk who is complete in these five factors may be therefore addressed as U Pyinsinga (ဦးပျဉ်ဗုံး). This term later abbreviated to U Pazin (ဦးပွဲ့ဗုံး), and further to U Zin (ဦးဇီး). This doesn't seem to be very easy to imagine, because the five factors relate to ordination of the monk-to-be, not to the monk himself after ordination. More importantly, however, the word doesn't express any respect toward that monk at all. Perhaps a more plausible theory is, that it comes from the word *upajjhāya*, the preceptor. This word has its equivalent in Burmese, namely *upizhay* (ဥပဒ္ဒယ်) and is yet another alternative for the original word that later became U Pazin (ဦးပွဲ့ဗုံး), and further U Zin (ဦးဇီး).

Becoming a monk is therefore very rare and exceptional opportunity. There are these five rarities as taught by the Buddha:

1. The rarity of Buddha's appearance
2. The rarity of becoming a human being
3. The rarity of ordaining as a monk
4. The rarity of complete faith (in the Buddha)
5. The rarity of getting the opportunity to listen to the Buddha's teachings.

All of these five are necessary to become a monk.

Even when one has faith and wants to become a monk, he should have the necessary requisites and necessities. In special cases one may become a monk with magically appeared requisites when the Buddha calls him "*ehi bhikkhu*" (come monk), a special kind of ordination carried out by the Buddha Himself.

However, it is not sufficient even if one has the five wealths.¹ The eight requisites are also necessary. They are: (1) under-robe, (2) upper-robe, (3) double-robe, (4) alms-bowl, (5) water-strainer, (6) belt, (7) needle and thread, and (8) razor.

(by Myat Lokapala, translated by monk Sarana (Czech))

The translation above is based on this Burmese article from Minbu Ashin Kiñcana, published e.g. in http://kyonpyawthar4.blogspot.com/2015/03/blog-post_88.html :

ရှင်ရဟန်းပြရမှာ

ဧေး။ ရှင်ဖြစ်ခြင်းအရို့၊ ရဟန်းဖြစ်ခြင်းအကိုက္ခိ
သိလိုပါသည်။ ရှင်များမှာ ပရီကွဲရာပြည့်စုံမှ ရှင်ပြရပါ
သလား။ ရဟန်းများမှာ ပရီကွဲရာရှစ်ပါးစုံမှ ရဟန်းပြရ
ပါသလား။ ယခုစေတ်မှာ ပါးအတူ၊ သားရေနယ်အတု
တွေနှင့် လုပ်နေကြတာတွေရပါသည်။ ပညာရှိများ
ဖြကြားတော်မူပါ။

သိလိုသူ

(ပုဒ္ဓဓမ္မလောက၊ အတွဲ ၁၇၊ အမှတ် ၈)

အဖြေ ။ ရှင်ပြရမှာ အရို့ ၃ ပါး။

၁။ ဆံပင်ရိပ်ခြင်း။

၂။ သက်နှုန်းထုတ်ပေးခြင်း။

၃။ သရဏာဂုံပေးခြင်း။ (ရှင်လောင်းနှင့်သရာ နှစ်ပါးလုံး
ဌာန် ကရှိက်းကျော် ပိုသရမည်။)

ရဟန်းပြရမှာ အရို့ ၅ ပါး

၁။ ဝတ္ထာဏ်ပြည့်စုံခြင်း။ (ရဟန်းလောင်းအသက် ၂၀
ပြည့်ရမည်။)

၂။ သိမ်၏ပြည့်စုံခြင်း။ (အောင်မြင်စွာ သမှတ်ထားအပ်
သော သိမ်ဖြစ်ရမည်။)

၃။ ပရီသတ်၏ ပြည့်စုံခြင်း။ (မဖွံ့မျှမှာ ၁၀ ပါး၊ ပစ္စာရှစ်မှာ
၅ပါး အနည်းဆုံးရှုရမည်။)

၄။ ဥတ်၏ပြည့်စုံခြင်း။ (ဥတ်ကို ဌာန် ကရှိက်းကျော်စွာ
တော်နိုင်ရမည်။)

၅။ ကမ္မဂါတော်၏ ပြည့်စုံခြင်း။ (ကမ္မဂါတော်ကို ဌာန်ကရှိက်း
ကျော်စွာ ဖတ်နိုင်ရမည်။) (တစ်ပါးပါးချွတ်ယွင်းလျှင်
ရဟန်းမဖြစ်)။

ပရီကွဲရာ ။ ရှင်လောင်းမှာ သင်းပိုင်၊ ကိုယ်ရုံ၊ ခါးပန်းကြိုး
သပိတ်အားဖြင့် အနည်းဆုံးလေးပါးရှုရမည်။

ရဟန်းလောင်းမှာ မိမိပိုင်သည့် သင်းပိုင်၊ ကိုယ်ရုံ၊ ခါးပန်းကြိုး
သပိတ်အားဖြင့် အနည်းဆုံးပါးပါးရှုရမည်။

ပရီကွဲရာသုဒ္ဓါသည်

၁။ အလက်ာရ = တန်ဆာ။

၂။ ပရီပါရ = အသုံးအဆောင်၊ အခြံအရုံ။

၃။ သွောရ = အဆောက်အအုံဟူသော အနက်သုံးပါးကို
ဟောပါသည်။

ထို့ကြောင့်အောက်ပါ ၄ တို့ဗြိုလည်း အောက်ပါအတိုင်း
၁။ပါးထိစွဲပြထားပါသည်။

၁။ သင်းပိုင်။

၂။ ဇကသီ။(ကိုယ်ရုံ)

၃။ ခုက္ခနာ။(နှစ်ထပ်သက်နှုန်း)

၄။ သပိတ်။

၅။ ခါးပန်းကြိုး။

၆။ သင်တုန်းခါး။

၇။ အပ်နှင့်အပ်ချည်။

၈။ ရေစစ်။

၉။ အိပ်ယာခင်း။

¹ see also “four wealths” (*cattāri sampatticakkāni*), namely (1) residence in appropriate dwelling place, (2) associating a good person, (3) making the right effort by oneself, and (4) merits accrued in the past (*AN 4.1.4.1. Cakka Sutta*)

၁၀။ နိသီဒိုင်။ (သားရေနယ်)
 ၁၁။ တောင်ဖျေး(သို့မဟုတ်) ဆီကျည်ဘူး။
 ၁၂။ ထိုး (သို့မဟုတ်) စိနပ်များဖြစ်သည်။
 (ပါရာနိုက - ဌာ။ မူလပရှာ့သာ ပါ-ဌာ။ အင်-ဂု-ဌာ။
 ဗုဒ္ဓံ-ဌာ။ အာတာက-ဌာ။
 ပရိက္ခရာဆိုသည့်အတိုင်း အပြည့်အစုံလှူ။ ဒါန်းပါလျှင်

အပြည့်အစုံအကျိုးခံစားရမည်။ မပြည့်မစုံနှင့်အတူအပ
 လှူ။ ဒါန်းပါလျှင် မပြည့်မစုံနှင့်အတူအပအကျိုးလောက်
 သာ ခံစားရမည်ဟု မှတ်သားရာသတည်း။
 (ဗုဒ္ဓဓမ္မလောက)

မင်းဘူးအရှင်ကဗ္ဗန
 ဘာသာရေးပြသနာအဖြော်များ။

2. Burmese Wizards and a small jellyfish

Any similarity? Actually, yes, there is – if both are the right ones!

In Myanmar, Burmese wizards ("weikzars") try in various ways to obtain immortality. Some, such as Bo Bo Aung, Bo Min Khaung, and the great weikzar monk of Sakhangyi Tawya (now roaming in a forest, though), are believed to be endowed with immortality, or centuries-long life-span.

I have found a very interesting species of marine fish, which seem to be similarly successful: *Turritopsis dohrnii*, "the immortal jellyfish". Unlike the century-living Japanese, *Turritopsis dohrnii*, who lives in the waters around their island, can survive even millennia – not because of Japanese food, but because it can revert to polyp stage whenever old or sick, and thus alter the differentiated state of its cells by "transdifferentiation".²

And the Buddha? Even regarding the life-span of the Buddha, the Pāli Commentaries rejected eternal life (so all those wizards are wrong!! ^_^) :

"The interval, kappa, here means a 'great' cycle (mahākappa), not its fourth part, the 'incalculable cycle' (asankheyakappa), nor the mere 'life-term' (āyukappa). Now some, like the Mahāsanghikas, hold this view, because they have not thoroughly grapsed the real advantage lying in the development of the steps to magic potency. The opponent, knowing that his vital principle or functioning is but the result of karma, has to deny that his vital funtions are determined by iddhi. All that magic potency can affect is to avert things that would bring about an untimely death."³

What does this mean? That when the Buddha was about to pass away, He announced to ven. Ānanda, that He could have lived whole "*kappa*" if ven. Ānanda requested the Buddha when the Buddha gave a hint that He is about to pass away. So, what did the Buddha mean by "*kappa*"? Burmese wizards believe, that it was billions of years, an aeon. However, the commentaries explain that in this very case it means 100 years or little bit over 100 years. The Buddha thus explained that anyway His maximum life-

² "also known as lineage reprogramming, is a process in which one mature somatic cell transforms into another mature somatic cell without undergoing an intermediate pluripotent state or progenitor cell type. It is a type of metaplasia, which includes all cell fate switches, including the interconversion of stem cells." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transdifferentiation> , retrieved on 170320.)

³ *Karīkhāvitaraṇī* Commentary, translated in "Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse being a translation of the *Kathā-Vatthu* from the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*", by S.Z. Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids, PTS, London, 1960; p.258.

span would be the ordinary maximum life-span of humans at that time, not a supernatural one. And the Mahāsaṅghikas didn't understand that and thought it otherwise. So ven. Moggaliputtatissa discussed this issue with them and entirely debunked their suggestion. You can read details about the Buddha's life-span issue from my compilation of various Pāli sources – all translated into English here:

<https://archive.org/download/BuddhasLifeSpan/Bonus%2014%20-%20Buddha's%20Life-Span.pdf>

You may also like to read about why the Buddha actually pass away, here:

http://www.lankalibrary.com/Bud/buddha_death.htm

The Buddha's life-span was only 80 years. There were cases of Arahants who lived longer, but none exceeded 160 years. Why should the Burmese wizards – not enlightened at all (intentionally, because they believe it is now no more possible to be enlightened anyway) – think they will have a longer life-span than that? Well, you may think this is my conjecture. But I'm not alone. The great Burmese masters, such as my mentor ven. Vajirapāṇībhivamsa (Vinayapiṭakadhara, Vinayapitakakovida) also do not believe that these wizards still live. (But note that some people claim, that they saw Bo Min Gaung – ca. 600-800 years old – as he visited Webu Sayadaw, ca. 70 years ago.)

Now what about the jellyfish? After having denied that Burmese wizards are immortal, I will have to deny the immortality of jellyfish as well. And yes, here it is – "in nature, most *Turritopsis* are likely to succumb to predation or disease in the medusa stage, without reverting to the polyp form."⁴

So the bottom line is, that ultimately neither the wizards, nor the jellyfish are immortal. ☺

3. In Search of Living Arahants in Sagaing Region

The Diary of Tanja & monk Saranā's Five-Day Exploration (March 8-12, 2017)

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Tanja (Germany) for her kind support of our trip in Sagaing Region, her participation, continuous help by act and speech as well, and finally for composing this detailed report.

08/03/2017

After meeting at Mandalay Airport in the morning (~ 10:15 a.m.), Venerable Saranā and I started our quest for Arahants in the Sagaing region of Myanmar. Venerable Saranā's supporters kindly drove us directly from the airport to the starting point of our mission: to meet with the Rector of Sitagu Academy, Sayadaw U Kumāra, with whom Venerable Saranā has developed a friendly relationship over the past few months.

The idea to search for Arahants, especially those who meditate in the forest, originated during a conversation at Shwedagon Pagoda in January 2017. Our shared wish to meet with Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw who is believed by many to be an Arahant directed our attention to his monastery in Sagaing. A few weeks before starting our journey we heard, however, that Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw no longer resides in this place, but is now living in a remote area in the Kachin region of Myanmar, an area full of landmines and he does not receive visitors in this dangerous place. Despite his current absence, we were still interested in going to Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's monastery to

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turritopsis_dohrnii, retrieved on 21st of March, 2017.

find out whether the residing Sayadaw or other monks there could direct us to some monks with highly developed meditation skills who practice in the forest.

Venerable Sarana explained our endeavor to Sayadaw U Kumāra who was very supportive of our plans and helped us organize transportation to Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's monastery. One matter of concern was the condition of the road. The monastery was approximately 150 miles away from Sagaing Hills and we would have to cross some dried river beds, the Sagaing mountain range and some deep forest areas to get there. So we were advised to travel with a 4WD. U Pho Byawt, a helper of Sayadaw U Uttarasāra of Sakhangyi Tawya, who lived in Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's monastery for 4 years, told Venerable Sarana that the roads are fine and the monastery is modernized (i.e. has electricity and reliable water supply). Since there was no 4WD available, Venerable Sarana hired a normal car for this journey and our driver for the next five days would be U Aung Khaing Thun.

We noticed that it was already too late (~ 2p.m.) in order to reach the forest monastery at a reasonable time, so we decided to stay the first night in the Sagaing hills. Venerable Sarana stayed at 90 caves monastery (Umin Koe Zhay) which is headed by Sayadaw Ashin Visuddha and he kindly arranged for me to stay at Sakyadhita nunnery, where nuns study for the Dhammācariya degree in Burmese language. Venerable Sarana introduced me with his incredibly fluent Burmese to Sakyadhita's head nun Hsayagyi Janakamālinī who was very kind and supportive of our mission and so I was allowed to stay there as the only yogi together with 185 nuns.

In the afternoon, Venerable Sarana, our driver U Aung Khaing Thun and I drove to Htut Khaung Chaung Monastery located about 45-60min drive from the Sagaing hills. During some research for the guide book "The Golden Path" which he co-authored, Venerable Sarana found out that there were monks meditating in the caves there, but he had not been able to visit them yet due to lack of time during his previous visit. In addition to that, two nuns, Saya Kin and Saya May Nat Bay who were believed to be enlightened lived there as well.

As we arrived at Htut Khaung Chaung (Upper) monastery, we met one monk, a nun and a lay woman there. The Sayadaw was not present, as he was reciting the Paṭṭhāna at the Kaung Hmu Daw Pagoda. The lay woman was so kind to lead us on a path to the meditators' caves. Firstly, after a 20 minute walk we reached a cave that had been inhabited by a monk who meditated there for over 20 years and left just a few months ago. We asked the lay woman why the monk had left, but we could not get a satisfying answer. The cave itself was locked and so we could only peek through the window. We could see that the walls on the inside of the cave were painted and there was some furniture inside the cave.

While walking back, we found a second cave. This was the cave in which Saya Kin stayed in. And....it was open! Both caves had three entrance doors that led to a larger cavage. There was a bigger cavage in the front and accessible through three openings, another smaller cavage in the back. We were not alone in the cave. As we explored the back part of the cave, several pairs of eyes were staring at us as we disturbed the bats' day sleep. Venerable Sarana also discovered a spider. Like the monk's cave, the walls of Saya Kin's cave were also smoothened with cement. In front of the cave, we found the compound and staircase of Saya Kin's former nunnery. It felt really inspiring to imagine how it must have looked like when she had been still alive and practicing there.

Finally, we drove to Kaung Hmu Daw Pagoda in order to speak with the Sayadaw of Htut Khaung Chaung monastery and see whether we could find out more about the monk who left the cave. However, Venerable Sarana's conversation with the Sayadaw did not reveal any further information.

09/03/2017

At 6:30 a.m. we embarked on our journey to the Northwest to find Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's monastery. On our way we passed through Shwebo, Ye-U and Kaduma. We crossed the Sagaing mountain range on narrow and windy roads. The forest on the eastern side of the mountain range was fairly dry and many trees had shed their

(really huge ~ 40cm in diameter) leaves. As we continued our journey, the forest became thicker and thicker and the trees higher and higher (up to 25-30m). I was quite surprised to find the last stretch of the road to be a fairly new and wide dirt road with huge ditches on both sides of the road, presumably to keep the wildlife off the road and to drain the road off water during the rainy season.

Shortly before sunset, after traveling for 11 hrs, we reached the gate of Mahā Myaing Tawya. From the gate which is just off the main road it is a five minute drive on a very wide and straight dirt road to the center's heart: the mighty 108 feet tall main pagoda. The construction works of the center have started in 2011 on a very large forest clearing and are still ongoing. The center's office, meditation hall and dining hall are all located in the deforested, open space around the pagoda, but the meditators' huts (*kutis*) are nestled into the forest along a small dirt road. While there was still some daylight we explored the pagoda and its wonders: the finished pagoda will have two levels on the outside, the lower level at its base and an upper level on which it can be circumambulated as well. Both men and women will have access to the upper level. On the ground level, the pagoda constitutes of a spacious hall with numerous pillars and four marble Buddha statues seated around the pagoda's core "pillar", a spiral staircase leading up to the higher inner levels of the pagoda. The walls of the first and second levels on the inside of the pagoda are adorned with handmade paintings (~ 3 x 1.8m in size) depicting the life of the Buddha at different stages. The third level has four openings facing towards the East, West, North and South with magnificent views. The last part of the spiral case ends just under the tip of the pagoda into which perhaps some relics have been placed.

Mahā Myaing Tawya has a reliable power supply and so the construction works inside the pagoda continued until after sunset. Later, we learnt that some of the construction workers are prisoners of a nearby jail.

We were very keen to meet with Thae Byu Sayadaw, the abbot of Mahā Myaing Tawya and a very experienced meditation teacher, so that we could learn more about the presence and whereabouts of other advanced meditators in the forests nearby. At 8:30 p.m., the Sayadaw had finished his chanting and was ready to receive us. Since I unfortunately do not understand Burmese (yet), I can only give a short summary of Venerable Saranā's translation to me after his conversation with Thae Byu Sayadaw: after sharing some of his own meditation experiences with Venerable Saranā, he mentioned that there are three places in the forest in which monks currently meditate. Two are within the range of 10 miles from Mahā Myaing Tawya and another place is about 100 miles away near the Indian border. Sayadaw agreed that we could visit the two nearby places, but that the far place would be too dangerous for foreigners to go to due to some political unrest in this area. Thae Byu Sayadaw told us that there is one monk currently meditating in the forest nearby and that he will show us around in the morning of the next day. Thae Byu Sayadaw also told Venerable Saranā about his personal experiences of Asuba (repulsiveness) practices in cemeteries and revealed that there is a cemetery nearby in which a monk has been living and practicing for many years. The local people are said to be afraid of this place, because they believe that ghosts may haunt them there. The presence of the monk, however, reduces their fear as he is believed to appease the ghosts through the power of his loving-kindness.

10/03/2017

Early in the morning we climbed up the pagoda to catch the magnificent sunrise from the eastern balcony of the third inner level of the main pagoda. Light layers of mist were covering the forest's canopy as the red sun was slowly appearing on the horizon.

After a vegetarian breakfast, we set off in one of the monastery's 4WDs together with a monk who was a student of Sayadaw Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa and is now meditating in the forest for four months. We planned to look at his meditation spot in the forest. We learnt from him that he usually sleeps at Mahā Myaing Tawya, takes breakfast there and then walks the 3 miles into the forest to meditate there during the day. In the evening he then returns to the center. The Venerable's meditation spot was near a plateau on which another smaller pagoda will be build and is

therefore accessible by car up until the last 200m. The forest was quite hilly in this area. The Venerable's meditation place consisted of a little tent in which he could sit, but not lay down and a little spot marked with several wooden sticks and a Sāsana flag at its center onto which another small pagoda will be built. There was no water supply.

One central reason for Venerable Saranya's search for Arahants or other advanced meditation practitioners was his goal of finding a teacher and a suitable forest refuge for his own meditation practice which he wishes to develop further by living the life of a forest monk himself and by following the Vinaya as precisely as possible. Therefore, in order to practice the ritual of going on alms round, a suitable place in the forest would be within walking distance from a village. The two forest areas we looked at, however, did not fulfill this criterion.

Next, we drove to the village with the cemetery. As the monk, our drivers and I took lunch (Venerable Saranya only takes one meal per day), the monk who lived in the cemetery met us at the restaurant. We found out that he was an elderly novice and he had been living in the cemetery for over 20 years. He guided us to the cemetery. Two graves were visible and the other ones where overgrown by trees and bushes. They consisted of concrete coffins and contained bones of the villagers. The cemetery was still in use. If somebody from the village passes away, they still take their dead bodies there to be buried. To us, there was nothing particularly scary about this graveyard, but we were of course there together with the elderly novice throughout our visit;-)

So, where to continue our search for Arahants and/or suitable forest meditation places for Venerable Saranya? We actually learned from the elderly novice monk that there was a little temple with two statues of nats (lesser deities) about 20 miles away on the same road we came from in which another of Thae Byu Sayadaw's disciple resided. So, we decided to leave Mahā Myaing Tawya and head back towards Sagaing hills in order to pay a visit to this monk.

The little temple called Beikthano Maedaw Gyi Shrine was sitting on the ridge of a forested hill in the Sagaing mountain range just next to the narrow and windy main road. Inside the temple, we found the statues of nats Beikthano and her daughter, the monk's bed and a lot of food offering in every corner of the temple. The resident monk welcomed us warmly by offering us some water melon and soda. He told us that he had been assigned by Thae Byu Sayadaw whose picture was hanging on the wall to look after the temple, to accept offerings to the deities and to distribute the offerings amongst the numerous visitors every day. These activities, the monk said, kept him busy throughout the day and therefore he did not have enough time to meditate much. A busy environment directly on the main road, although being beautifully located, was not what we were looking for. However, the monk told Venerable Saranya about another little monastery not far from Mahā Myaing Tawya in which Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw was meditating himself for years. He also said that there is a monk currently meditating there in silence. Interestingly, Thae Byu Sayadaw did not mention this place to us, but it sounded really interesting. So we decided to drive all the way back to Mahā Myaing Tawya in order to visit this place in the next morning.

11/03/2017

It was a rainy morning. Before heading to Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's former retreat place, we intended to talk again with Thae Byu Sayadaw to inquire more about this place, how to get there and the monk who resided there. However, Thae Byu Sayadaw was outside the center until lunch time. We were told that there is a man from the nearby village who knew the way to our destination and who could lead us there. Ywarthan U Myint Aung told us that Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's little forest monastery was about 10 miles away from Mahā Myaing Tawya and the forest road was good. So we started our journey into the forest after breakfast together with U Myint Aung and the Toyota we came with. It was still drizzling, sometimes more strongly, sometimes a little bit less. But nothing could stop us from going on this exciting discovery trip :-)

Although the forest road was wide enough for a car to pass, it was very sandy in places. After about 5 miles we reached a stretch in which the sand was too deep for a normal car to pass and we got stuck. I experienced these kind

of challenges before while I lived in Uganda and Kenya and so we tried everything to continue our journey: digging, backing up and trying to support the tires with branches and leaves to get out of the deep tracks and go up on the side with one tire and between the tracks with the other. But the sand was just too deep, well, or the car too low and we could not continue our journey with this car. At least we tried :-) we had approximately another 5 miles ahead of us and it was still drizzling. Nevertheless, we decided to walk the rest of the way to our destination on (bare-) foot.

The sandy forest road led us through the astoundingly beautiful tropical forest and some dense bamboo groves. The rainy weather endowed the forest with a misty look and I was particularly amazed by the many different shades of vibrant red and brown colors from fallen leaves and some tree flowers on the forest floor. This was nothing like I had ever seen before while living in the Ugandan rain forest. This part of the forest seemed more pristine and dense than the forest we visited the day before. However, we could still hear chain saws from illegal pit sawing activities in the distance. ... The hilly path lead us through some dried river beds (now full of flowers) and some wooden bridges.

After a 2.5 hours walk, we reached a dried river bed and branched off into a smaller path leading through a (also fairly dry) swamp. After a few minutes, we reached a gate with the following writing in Burmese: "Please do not enter, we are meditating here". Well, we did enter, of course, led by our curiosity, but we kept silent :-) There was a little path leading up a hill to another gate which was part of a fence surrounding an approximately one acre compound with a quite modern looking wooden house in the middle. There was another signboard reminding visitors not to enter the compound, but this was not possible anyway as the gate was locked from both the inside and the outside. The building was approximately 100m away from the fence and so we could not see whether someone was inside or not.

Our guide U Myint Aung told us that there was another place on the opposite side of this compound and that he could take us there. We walked for another 20 minutes or so and arrived at the bottom of a 50m long concrete driveway resembling a skate board pipe and leading up to the gate of a little monastery called Khaung Nan Panlin Dhammetha Sakhan ("The Dhamma Retreat of a Topmost Palace's Throne"). We peeked through the gate and saw 3-4 buildings. Suddenly, on the far side of the compound, a monk appeared with his begging bowl. So we assumed that he must have just returned from alms round and that he was the monk we were looking for. Our guide told us that he usually only receives visitors at 5p.m., but as we were standing there, it was only 2 p.m. and if we had waited until 5p.m., we would have had to walk back in the dark. Therefore, we were so excited as we saw the monk approaching the gate with a key in his hand!

After inviting us in, the monk took us to an open meditation hall (open here means having a roof, but no solid walls). There was a picture of Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw on the wall. The four of us sat down on the carpet and Venerable Saranā started talking with the monk. After a few moments a little gray cat approached Venerable Saranā and made himself comfortable right next to him on his sitting cloth for the entire duration of the conversation :-)

The monk's name was Venerable Sumana (meaning "good mind"). He had been living in this place for 9 years and was ordained as a novice. Since there is no village nearby in which a monk could go for alms round, he remained a novice so that he could cook for himself while he stayed in this monastery on his own. Venerable Sumana said that there is another monk living in the locked compound we just came from, but that there is no contact between him and this monk. In fact, Venerable Sumana did not know whether the other monk was still there and how he received his food. Despite the fact that going on alms round is not possible while living at this monastery, Venerable Saranā really liked this place as a starting point for his planned long forest retreat. So he asked Venerable Sumana whether it was possible to practice there together with him. Initially, when Venerable Saranā told him that he wants to stay for 10 years, Venerable Sumana was very hesitant, but as Venerable Saranā suggested to try for a few months and then see how it goes, Venerable Sumana agreed and even offered to cook for Venerable Saranā who, as a fully ordained monk, is not allowed to cook for himself.

I really felt a connection with the forest as well. Being exposed to and taking in the serene forest atmosphere again more than five years after leaving the Ugandan rain forest (I was there for research, not for meditation) enhanced my wish to live in the forest again and to meditate there. Since it is not possible for a lay woman or nun to stay together with a few monks in the same forest refuge, I asked Venerable Sumana whether there is a place like this for women as well. He answered that the best place for me (or any woman) would be to meditate at Mahā Myaing Tawya and he told me about a Spanish nun who had practiced in a little wooden hut at the edge of Mahā Myaing Tawya. So now, I really wanted to find this little hut and explore its surroundings.

We also found out that Venerable Sumana had lived together with Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw in this little monastery for three years before he left in 2012. Altogether Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw lived there for 9 years. After leaving from this monastery, Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw moved to an area north of Mandalay and from there to another place in Southern Sagaing. We learnt that he is currently residing in remote area in the Northern part of Sagaing called Shwe Hnit Village (=Golden Essence), 8 miles from Ban Mauk Town of Kathar District in Northern Shan Division.⁵ At the end of our visit, we took a picture together at the gate (also featuring the gray cat who followed us;-) We were lucky that the rain shower that was ongoing throughout our conversation stopped just before we departed on our three hour walk back to where we left the car.

Before heading back, our guide showed us two more buildings and a little pagoda just next to Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's forest refuge. We learnt that they were used to accommodate Mahā Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw's visitors at busy times when the other building inside the monastery was full.

After 2.5 hrs of straight walking, we reached the car and the driver who waited for us there listening to birds, as he said. We were happy and grateful for having discovered this wonderful place and having found a good starting point from which Venerable Saranā will be able to commence his forest retreat next year.

As we arrived at Mahā Myaing Tawya, it was already getting dark. So we did not have much time to find the Spanish Sayalay's forest hut. Thanks to our driver efforts, we could find it quickly. It was a two-storied, small wooden house built on a little plateau on top of a small hill inside the forest, but not really far away from the other kuṭis. It had a little balcony on the top floor and some inspiring phrases on its door that were most likely written down there by the Spanish nun. Now the kuṭi is inhabited by a monk. The forest around is quite nice, but one day I hope to find a forest refuge in a pristine forest that is also safe for women to stay and meditate in.

12/03/2017

We started our journey back at 4:15 am. It was still overcast and rainy. While the road was good and easy to drive on for a "normal" car (not 4WD) on our way into Mahā Myaing forest, it was more challenging on our way back. The road was muddy and slippery in some places. However, it was manageable thanks to our skilled driver U Aung Khaing Thun. In addition, road works are under way that, in the long run, will improve the road conditions at least in and around some villages on the way. Our driver told us that during the rainy season, in order to reach Mahā Myaing Tawya, it may be a better idea to fly to Kalay and then take a taxi for the last 50 miles to Mahā Myaing Tawya from the airport.⁶

5 မဟာလေပြိုင်ဆရာတော်သည် တန်းမောက်ပြုအနီး(8)ပိုင်အကွဲရွှေမှာသတ်းသုံးနေပါတယ်။ စစ်ကိုင်းတိုင်း ကသာခရှင်၊ ရွှေနှင့်ရွှေ။

6 Take airplane to Kalay City (ကလေးမြို့) in Sagaing Region and from there take a taxi (search နိုင်းသူတားလိုင်းအသင်း in Telephone Directory (စာထုတ်ဖော်လမ်းညွှန်)) to Thae Byu Sayadaw's Mahamyaing Tawya (သဲပြုဆရာတော်ရဲ့မဟာမြိုင်တော်). From there take the villager U Myint Aung (ရွာသား ဦးမြိုင်အောင်) as the guide and travel directly to the old monastery of Mahā Bodhi Myaing Monastery.

We reached Sitagu Academy at 5p.m⁷⁸ and while the birthday celebrations for Sitagu Sayadaw were in full swing. This was the end of our journey on the trails of Arahants in Sagaing.

You may see photos from the journey here:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1878493835758644.1073741862.100007941367343&type=3>

4. From Palace to Heaven: My Dreaming in Malaysia

On my way from Yangon to Australia (14th of March, 2017), I happened to realize that I was told at the check-in counter that I have no ticket to Australia, so all luggage comes to Malaysia (the transit airport) and there I have to take it, and with Visa for Australia I have to come again through Malasian check-in and board on the right plane. So far so good. Just apply for the eVisitor, and quickly on board. Unfortunately, my Visa application apparently fell in the hands of manual transcribers, so instead of receiving the visa upon my arrival to Malaysia, I was simply stranded in the transit station with no way to go.

A Burmese lady took care for me, and by generosity of my Australian supporters, I spent one night in the luxurious Samasama Hotel of Kuala Lumpur Air+port. That hotel is almost always full – but when I came, a single room was empty: a suite. A suite is a combined room with TV in living room and bed-room as well, king-size bed, and what not. If you like to enjoy it, prepare \$250 per night. But how does a strict, conscientious Buddhist monk enjoy a luxurious hotel-room? I didn't turn on the TV, didn't lie on the bed, didn't take a single drink from the fridge, didn't ask for champagne or even a little dinner. Obviously, no swimming pool or sauna too. So, not very "suite"able. ☺

In Malaysia, there is a world-famous monastery with a world-famous monk. Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Santuary (SBS) is located in Taiping, ca. 4 hours car-drive from Kuala Lumpur. Although not a stone-throw from Kuala Lumpur, it is one place that is worth visiting – especially if you're a strict monk who doesn't use money. In fact, it seems it is not easy to find an equivalent monastery in Kuala Lumpur. Tell me if you know better.

SBS was a magnificent experience. There were three monks – ven. Kumāra – the resident abbot, ven. Meghacitta (a diligently meditating monk who has 8 years of monkhood now), and ven. Nirodha, a monk of one rains (year) of monkhood. Wifi is available only through "publishing room", and it is received

7 On the way from Thae Byu, if you go by car to Sagaing, after ca. 3-4 hours drive you arrive to the village Taw Gyn (တော်ဂျင်္ဂီး, also known as Taw Gyn Sakhan - တော်ဂျင်စခန်း). In this village there are two shops with food - La Pyi (လာပါ = "Full Moon"), where it is possible to purchase sweets and rehydration salts. Little bit further from there (on the way to Sagaing) is the second shop Miba Ayeik (မိဘအရှင် = "The Shadow of (Our) Parents"), where you can get deliciously cooked rice and several vegetarian curries.

8 On the way from Thae Byu (Mahāmyaing Forest) to Sagaing, it is possible to cross the river မှုတ် (Mu Myit), which flows through Ye Oo Town (ရွှေဦးဗြို့). There is a saying that the local villagers who haven't seen the river Irawady, think that Irawady is as big as the river Mu Myit (မှုတ်) - because whole life the river Mu Myit was the source of their water and livelihood - and no other river. Later the saying came to be used also for other cases of misperception, including relationship - a lady might think that every handsome man might be as kind to her as her father, which would then lead to her life-long suffering.

by a telephone antenna – which, on a hill being Taiping's Perak – is not particularly smooth experience. Ven. Kumāra has his personal connection (not sure how good that might be), and then there is a secret connection in the office, which you may use only in very urgent cases. It's a meditation center, so what would you expect, right? ☺

I was given a paradisical room with paradisical view at a paradisical location. Only later I learned, that I've missed a thrilling experience of seeing an eagle binging on a snake. And I suppose I could see much more if I stayed longer.

In the morning, we – the three monks – walk down the huge hill through a thick forest, and emerge in a neat Chinese cemetery. A large cemetery. Walking through the forest we are mindful of present moment, and walking through the cemetery we're reminded of our future. From there we enter a road, by which we gradually approach the house of the Malaysian donors. Very devout, faithful donors. We received sumptuous, delicious, rich food – with so much choice that even me, a vegetarian, could easily satisfy my stomach by whatever suitable – and enjoy it after ven. Kumāra gives a little Dhamma talk (I think in Chinese) to the generous donors.

On the second day of my visit in paradise I learned that Australia government compassionately awarded me with a visa, so I headed back to Kuala Lumpur right next morning, and at night (16th of March, 2017) again eleven kilometers above ground, heading toward Australia.

You may like to see photos from my fantastic Malaysian trip here:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1878488559092505.1073741861.100007941367343&type=3>

https://youtu.be/kw_WKwr-fbk

May all beings be happy and healthy ☺

monk Saranā